

UPPER MISSOURI COTEAU

Montana Partners for Fish & Wildlife



Introduction and General Description

The Upper Missouri Coteau Focus Area is located in the extreme northeastern corner of the state. Its boundaries are formed by the Canadian border, the state line between North Dakota and Montana, the Fort Peck Indian Reservation, and Missouri River. The Focus Area includes Sheridan, Roosevelt, and Daniels Counties.

This tri-county area was entirely glaciated and is a continuation of the Prairie Pothole Region of the Dakotas. The northern portions of the Focus Area have terrain common to the glacial Missouri Coteau, a very hilly landscape dotted with numerous shallow wetlands.

Native vegetation is of the mixed-grass prairie type. The area lies in the transition zone between the tallgrass prairie to the east and the shortgrass prairie of central Montana. Cool season grasses predominate with scattered shrub communities. Intact wetland-grassland complexes are inter-mixed with intensively farmed areas throughout northeastern Montana. Many of the intact wetland-grassland tracts are privately owned.

The climate is typical of the northern Great Plains, with warm summers, cold winters, and marked variation in seasonal precipitation, which averages 12 to 15 inches per year. Temperatures can exceed 100 degrees in the summer and drop to minus 45 degrees in winter.



The Focus Area includes Medicine Lake National Wildlife Refuge with a total of 31,660 acres of open water, marsh and upland acres and 43 Waterfowl Production Areas (WPA's) totaling 11,772 acres. The WPA's vary in size from 4 acres to 2,012 acres. An additional 18,592 acres of privately owned wetlands and uplands are protected with perpetual conservation easements. The potential for protecting additional wetland-grassland habitat with easements is high.



Species of Special Concern

Habitat diversity plays a key role in supporting the Upper Missouri Coteau's wildlife diversity. The combination of wetlands, native and tame grasslands, and agricultural fields provides habitats for various resident and migratory birds as well numerous species of mammals, reptiles, and amphibians.

There are several Species of Special Concern found in the Focus Area. These include: burrowing owl, Baird's sparrow, Sprague's pipit, Forster's tern, black tern, lark bunting, grasshopper sparrow, Franklin's gull, marbled godwit, ferruginous hawk, horned grebe, and common tern. The piping plover is listed as threatened species and 85% of Montana's total breeding population is found in the Upper Missouri Coteau Focus Area.

Threats

Threats within the Upper Missouri Coteau Focus Area are generally related to agriculture. Wetland drainage, prairie conversion, encroachment of non-native grass species into native prairie, invasive species, erosion, wetland sedimentation, and degraded water quality from nutrients and pesticides are all problems. Any slowdown in the livestock industry will force landowners to convert more native grassland to cropland.

Oil and gas development is another concern. Spills, leaks, saltwater contamination, and habitat loss from pipelines and roads are adversely impacting wetlands and uplands.

Conservation Strategies

Habitat work will continue to emphasize wetland creation and restoration work, perpetual wetland and grassland easements, and grazing systems. Additional opportunities for habitat work are becoming available through new Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) enrollments. Unlike prior enrollments, recent sign-ups emphasize wildlife habitat restoration and enhancement. Landowners now have a strong incentive to use the Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program, or other tools, to increase their Environmental Benefit Index Scores.

Portions of the Focus Area have abundant nesting cover in the form of CRP or native rangelands, but lack wetlands. Depending on topography and soil conditions, there is potential for creating shallow impoundments as well as restoring drained wetlands. Artificial wetlands are generally constructed in drainages with very gradual slopes to provide shallow wetland habitat for



shorebirds and waterfowl. In some areas, reservoir complexes that mimic the productive characteristics of natural wetland complexes have been constructed. Establishing additional wetland habitat has been a key objective of the Northeast Montana Prairie Pothole Joint Venture Project.

Securing perpetual conservation easements is another key component of our conservation strategy in the Upper

Missouri Coteau. Easements are strictly voluntary, and the land remains in private ownership. Haying and grazing are allowed, but grasslands cannot be broken. Wetlands cannot be drained, filled, or burned. We believe that easements are a powerful tool that compliment Medicine Lake's Wetland Management District and prevent additional habitat fragmentation on private land.

Partners

Key partners in the Upper Missouri Coteau Focus Area include: private landowners, Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks, Montana Department of Transportation, Montana Department of Environmental Quality, Montana Department of Natural Resources, Ducks Unlimited, Pheasants Forever, Montana Chapter of the Nature Conservancy, Montana Native Plant Society, Environmental Protection Service, Natural Resources Conservation Service, and cooperators from the North American Waterfowl Management Plan.

Another valuable partner is the Fort Peck Tribe.

Accomplishments

Over the past 12 years, approximately \$3,500,000 has been spent on habitat work affecting more than 140 square miles within the Focus Area. The primary objective has been to improve waterfowl and waterbird production by improving habitat and/or protecting productive grassland-wetland complexes. Projects developed in northeastern Montana in cooperation with over 230 landowners have laid a broad foundation for continued work on private lands.

Wetland Restoration	331 Sites	4,950 Acres
Upland Enhancement	165 Sites	49,555 Acres
Conservation Easements	20 Sites	11,611 Acres
Fee Title Acquisition	5 Sites	1,674 Acres

Our cooperative efforts with area Natural Resources Conservation Service offices have also resulted in a number of new projects. These multi-agency projects have resulted in sharing ideas and costs so as to provide a better product at less expense to the partners involved.

Future Needs

- Continue wetland restoration/establishment on private land
- Expand wetland/grassland easement acquisition program
- Obtain additional North American Wetland Conservation Act (NAWCA) funding for habitat restoration and easements
- Explore new funding sources for easements
- Strengthen our working relationship with Fort Peck Tribes with a focus on easements and the Manning Lake wetland/native prairie complex



Missouri Coteau (4,500,000 acres)

